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Ancient Weapons from the Siege of Ninety Six

By James Legg and Steve Smith

During the summer of 2020, we have been busy preparing the report for our two "Maymester" seasons of field work at the Star Fort, at Ninety Six National Historic Site in Greenwood County. (See *Legacy* July 2018, July 2019, and the article on pages 5-7 of this issue). The large collection of artifacts from that project includes some remarkably archaic weapons technology employed by both the Loyalist defenders of the Star Fort and the Americans who lay siege to the fort in 1781.

The Americans successfully employed fire arrows in the siege of Fort Motte a few weeks before the siege of Ninety Six was undertaken (see *Legacy* December 2015), for the fire arrow point we recovered from the American siege camp at Fort Motte). The effort was repeated with less success at Ninety Six, including the Star Fort, where we recovered another wrought iron arrow point. A British source described these "African arrows" as "fitted to the bores of musquets" from which they were

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Figure 1: Iron weapons from the 1781 siege of the Star Fort at Ninety Six: From upper left, fire arrow point, spear heads, and pike point. (Photo by James B. Legg)

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Thank You! Nena Powell Rice, Editor, (803) 331-3431 Cell, (nrice@sc.edu).

water, their emergence from the ground happens *en masse*, and it happens at night. Dobsonflies are nocturnal.

If we return to the Mississippian cosmos, the hellgrammite does some very meaningful things. They live under the water, shed their skin, emerge during thunderstorms, burrow into the ground, then transform into a flying being of the night sky. Their association with water, underground burrows, (and later the night sky), along with their general nocturnal nature, identifies them as beings of the beneath realm. That they shed their skin connects them to snakes—another important resident of the beneath realm. Like rattlesnakes (Hudson 1976), hellgrammites may be associated with thunderstorms and rain. The connection to rain and the growing season is reinforced by the fact that hellgrammites leave the water, pupate, and emerge as Dobsonflies during the spring and summer. While hellgrammites might represent some being of the beneath realm associated with storms and rain, their entire life cycle can be viewed as a metaphor for the path of a soul after death. After death, the body is placed in the ground, while the soul eventually alights to the path of souls and the realm of the dead.

The final piece of attempting to understand the referent of an image is to explore the existing historic narrative record of culturally related people. In this case, this is likely to be Cherokee, Catawba, and Creek people. Currently, we know of no ethnographic information from any of the three groups that reference hellgrammites or any supernatural with similar characteristics. This result should not be overly surprising. It is important to remember that identities like Cherokee, Catawba, and Creek grew out of the coalescence of formerly independent ethnic groups impacted by European disease, violence, slaving, and Colonial economics. The fact that the Wateree Bug appears to be limited to a single century in a limited area of central South Carolina suggests it may have been part of a local, short term tradition that did not survive the ravages of history.

If the referent is intended to be a beneath realm creature, as we suspect, why would it appear on pottery vessels? That is a question best explored by learning more about the vessels it was placed on and how those vessels were used in the past. We can learn a lot about how they were used by understanding where they were found on archaeological sites (houses, general garbage deposits, special contexts like mounds or mortuary deposits). We can also learn some important things about how the vessels were used by exploring what they once held. This can be done by chemically analyzing samples from vessels with the Wateree Bug. To do both of those things, we need to learn more about the Wateree Bug and the pottery vessels it was placed on. If you know of any examples of the Wateree Bug, please contact Chris Judge (judge@sc.edu) or Adam King (aking@sc.edu) to share additional examples of this unique phenomena.

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See a short film of a live Hellgrammite

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=40&v=zjLBd3oLOco&feature=emb_title

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discharged. They were entwined with flax, dipped in combustibles lighted…" The tip of our arrow point is curled from a heavy impact. Also in the Star Fort, we recovered two different examples of large, crudely forged spearheads that might have been at home in Iron Age Europe. These weapons are documented by the same British source, who reported "Spears… had been made by the direction of this excellent officer [Star Fort commander Major Green]; they were piled up against the parapet, and the men were ordered, on discharging their musquets, to use the spears." A final example is a broken iron pike point that we recovered from a distant American artillery position that fired on the Star Fort early in the siege; it is very similar in appearance to the sort employed during the 30 Years War. While the Revolutionary War occurred well into the era of gunpowder warfare, the participants were entirely prepared to kill one another with swords, sabres, spears, pikes, halberds, spontoons, tomahawks, and bayonets, as well as ordinary fire.

Figure 2: Spear head recovered from behind the parapet of Star Fort. This example had been driven deep into the subsoil, and the shaft was presumably snapped off. This deliberate destruction may have occurred when the fort was abandoned by the British. (Photo by James B. Legg)